

Message Text

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ACTION SCS-06

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FOR SCS

E.O. 11652 N/A
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SUBJECT: FORMAT AND REVISED PROCEDURES FOR DIRECT RELAY NOTIFICATION
OF DEATH TELEGRAMS

REF: STATE 199909

1. FOR REASONS OUTLINED BELOW, EMBASSY ATHENS, WISHES TO EXPRESS
SERIOUS RESERVATIONS CONCERNING THE REVISED NOTIFICATION OF DEATH
FORMAT WHICH, IN SEVERAL CRUCIALASPECTS, WE CONSIDER INAPPROPRIATE
AND MISLEADING WITH REGARD TO GREECE AND, WE SUSPECT, TO MANY OTHER
COUNTRIES AS WELL.

2. WHILE WE SHARE THE DEPARTMENT'S DESIRE TO OFFER BEREAVED FAMILIES
ALTERNATIVES TO THE EXPENSE INVOLVED IN EMBALMING AND AIR SHIPMENT
OF REMAINS, WE ARE CONCERNED THAT IT IS UNFAIR NOT TO DRAW TO THEIR
ATTENTION AS WELL THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF LOCAL BURIAL. IN GREECE,
FOR EXAMPLE, BODIES ARE DISINTERRED THREE YEARS AFTER BURIAL AT WHICH
TIME THE FAMILY IS FACED ANEW WITH THREE ALTERNATIVES: TO HAVE THE
REMAINS MOVED TO A PERMANENT PLOT- AT A COST OF SEVERAL THOUSAND
DOLLARS; TO HAVE THE REMAINS KEPT IN AN OSSUARY IN EXCHANGE FOR A
YEARLY FEE; TO SHIP THE REMAINS BACK TO THE U.S. FOR DISPOSITION
THERE. IN SHORT, IT MAY BE LESS SATISFACTORY TO HAVE TO FACE THE
HARD FINANCIAL REALITIES AT A LATER DATE, COMPOUNDED BY
RENEWED EMOTIONAL UPHEAVAL. IN OUR EXPERIENCE, THE DISINTERRMENT
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PROCEDURE IS A SHOCKING SURPRISE TO MAY FAMILIES.

3. CREMATION IS NOT AN OPTION IN GREECE.

4. IN PARA THREE OF THE REVISED FORMAT, THE DEPARTMENT PLACES
ON THE POST ABROAD THE ONUS OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR INSURING THAT THE
FAMILIES' WISHES ARE ADHERED TO CONCERNING CEREMONIES AND BURIAL

SITES. ASIDE FROM THE QUESTIONABLE PROPRIETY OF MAKING SUCH
COMMITMENTS IN ADVANCE, (ESPECIALLY ON BEHALF OF "LOCAL OFFICIALS") WE

WOULD POINT OUT THAT, IN GREECE, MANY OUTLYING DISTRICTS WILL NOT BURY

FOREIGNERS AT ALL AND CANNOT UNDERTAKE RELIGION RITUALS OR CEREMONIES
FOR ANY RELIGION OTHER THAN GREEK ORTHODOXY. CONSEQUENTLY, BODIES WOULD

HAVE TO BE SHIPPED TO ONE OF THE METROPOLITAN CENTERS. MOREOVER,
FAMILIES WOULD HOLD THE POST ACCOUNTABLE FOR DEVIATIONS FROM THEIR
WISHES IN SITUATIONS OVER WHICH CONSULAR OFFICERS HAVE NO CONTROL.
REFRIGERATION IS NOT AVAILABLE, FOR EXAMPLE, IN GREECE OTHER THAN IN
MAJOR CITIES.

5. WE WOULD APPRECIATE KNOWING THE FACTUAL BASIS FOR THE STATEMENT
"MOST AMERICANS WHO DIE ABROAD ARE BURIED THERE". THIS MAY BE TRUE
IF THE NUMBER INCLUDES AMERICANS RESIDENT ABROAD WITH NO REAL TIES
TO THE U.S., BUT IT ENTIRELY EVADES THE CRUX OF THE MATTER, NAMELY
THE DEATH OF THE TRAVELING AMERICAN. IN OUR EXPERIENCE (THE EMBASSY
HANDLED 47 DEATH CASES LAST YEAR IN WHICH BODIES WERE SHIPPED TO THE
U.S.), UNLESS THE DECEASED HAS RELATIVES IN GREECE, OR NONE CAN BE
LOCATED IN THE U.S., THEY ARE ALMOST NEVER BURIED HERE. TO STATE
OTHERWISE MAY BE MISLEADING".

6. MANY OF THE AMERICAN DEATHS OCCURING IN GREECE ARE UNDER
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VIOLENT OR OTHER UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES (SUICIDES, AUTO ACCIDENTS,
FALLS FROM HIGH PLACES). FAMILIES ARE NATURALLY INTERESTED IN
ALL AVAILABLE DETAILS AND DOGGEDLY PURSUE THE MATTER LONG AFTER THE
DEATH. IT DOES NOT APPEAR TO US REALISTIC THEREFORE, TO EXPECT THE
FAMILIES TO OPT FOR DISPOSITION OF THE REMAINS OF A LOVED ONE WHO
HAS DIED UNDER SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES TO TAKE PLACE THOUSANDS OF MILES
FROM HOME. HERE, AT LEAST, FAMILIES GENERALLY CHOOSE THE FINANCIALLY
MORE BURDENSOME ALTERNATIVE WITHOUT MUCH COMPLAINT FOR THESE AND
OTHER, LESS TANGIBLE PSYCHIC AND EMOTIONAL REASONS(WHAT THE
DEPARTMENT REFERS TO REFTEL AS THE "GUILTY FEELING"). SOME, WE
BELIEVE, WOULD FIND THE SUGGESTION OF LOCAL BURIAL AS OUTLINED IN
THE NEW FORMAT OFFENSIVE. WE FIND IT, AT LEAST IN ITS PRESENT
FORM, UNTENABLE AND SUGGEST POSTS BE AUTHORIZED TO WORD NOTIFICATIONS
OF DEATH IN A MANNER APPROPRIATE TO THE CIRCUMSATANCES OF THE
COUNTRY IN QUESTION.
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